Collaborating outside our schools strengthens the quality of what we can achieve within them.

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Teaching was once the loneliest profession. You taught by yourself, separated from the other adults. You were lucky if you even got a minute to go to the restroom. Nobody ever saw what you did, and sometimes it seemed that no one really cared—unless your kids became a problem. The principal came by to do his or her annual evaluation, and that was it. The rest of the year, you were on your own.

In the past few years, all this has started to change. Literacy coaches have entered thousands of classrooms. Principal walkthroughs have gotten teachers and leaders talking about instruction. Professional learning communities provoke shared thinking about goals and results. Data-driven improvement is turning an intuitive and individualized profession into one that’s more open and evidence-based. The teacher’s job is becoming much more transparent and the walls of privatism in teaching are finally coming down.

So here’s the rub: Teachers might be working significantly more with one another, but principals are not. Superintendents might bring principals together for district meetings or even to expose their performance results to colleagues in public, but principal collaboration is too often trumped by district control. Even worse, more and more schools and their principals are now in direct competition. Schools compete with their neighbors for the most marketable families and their children and for the best teachers and staff. Charter schools compete with all their surrounding public schools for human as well as financial resources. Why collaborate with your neighbors when they might use your advice to surpass you?

Principals are the second greatest influence on student achievement after teachers. You would think this would mean finding ways to give principals more power and influence, to enhance principal empowerment. But instead, all the things that enhance empowerment—discretion over judgment, access to other peers, collaborative relationships with colleagues—have been historically denied to them and are becoming even more so.
How Helping Others Helps You
There is an aspect of hypocrisy in school leadership: Teachers collaborate, but principals compete. This is morally and professionally inconsistent. It prevents schools from learning from one another and has a negative effect on student achievement results. It doesn’t have to be this way. Schools and their principals should collaborate together—many principals in other high-performing countries already do, and more U.S. principals must follow suit.

The Leading Edge

We have been recently studying high-performing systems in education across the world and outside education, too. What we are learning is that one reason organizations perform far above what we might expect is that they have a collaborative edge. They use collaboration to gain extra advantage: an additional push in performance and results. They are also on the leading edge of what actually counts as collaborative practice.

Let’s look at four examples.

Finland. Finland is the nation that leads the world on the Program for International Student Achievement (PISA) tests. Schools here collaborate together for the benefit of the cities and communities they serve. In the city of Tampere, high school principals meet regularly to discuss improvements of common concern that they will pursue together. If one school does not have enough resources, it can phone the other principals and one of them will say: “We have a little bit extra. Would you like some of ours?” Strong schools don’t compete against weak ones, but help them instead. Their individual and common interests are seen as being the same.

In cultures of trust, cooperation, and collective responsibility, Finnish teachers design curricula together in each municipality within broad national guidelines, and say they care and feel responsible for all the children in their schools, not just those in their own grades and classes. Finnish educators have a collaborative edge that puts them ahead of the rest of the world.

Alberta, Canada. If this sounds far-fetched, even socialist, then consider a second example. The next highest performer on the international PISA tests is the Canadian province of Alberta.

Created by the teacher’s union with the government, the decade-old Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) spends $80 million a year (2 percent of the provincial education budget) on more than 90 percent of its schools and districts to develop their own improvements and innovations. Schools are networked within and across their districts. Districts that cannot show they have learned from other districts undertaking similar reforms are not favored for AISI funding. Everyone has to document the impact on student learning.

In The Learning Mosaic, the 2009 external review for the province’s ministry of education, Andy Hargreaves and Dennis Shirley reported with colleagues on how AISI has unleashed the grassroots creativity of teachers, administrators, and community members, helping to make Alberta a world leader in education.

England. Across the Atlantic, England might not be a top international performer, but some schools do much better than the rest. One of its recent reform strategies has been school federations—schools that work together for mutual learning and assistance. In their 2009 report for the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children’s Services on The Impact of Federations on Student Outcomes, Chris Chapman and his colleagues found that not all federations benefit student outcomes. Only what they call “performance federations”—the matching of “strong” with “struggling” schools—significantly outperform a matched sample of non-federated counterparts in literacy and math.

In The Fourth Way: The Inspiring Future for Educational Change, Hargreaves and Shirley describe an evaluation their team conducted of a network of 300 previously underperforming English schools in which two-thirds of them raised student achievement at double the national rate in two years. Instead of making schools compete with one another, this strategy favored improvement “by schools, with schools.”

Underperforming schools were invited and funded to join the network, brought together at conferences where they received inspiration from turn-around peers, and also expert assistance on how to use data to improve achievement. At the conferences, schools could access mentor schools that achieved higher results with similar students. Visits followed, strategies were exchanged, but no compulsion was involved. Yet achievement results as well as the process of participating were transparent and few schools refused the opportunity of help.

In these networks, or federations, robust and transparent cooperation—not market competition or top-down intervention by central office—is the best way forward. In England’s performance federations, resources for improvement are not funneled through the district office to intervene, but distributed to schools themselves so they can assist one another. Some of the money goes toward replacement costs while leaders are helping their peers in other schools.

Business world. The benefit of being on the collaborative edge is not confined to education. As long ago as 1994, Rosabeth Moss Kanter wrote about the importance of “the collaborative advantage” in the Harvard Business Review.
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Securing a collaborative advantage, she found, meant looking beyond the immediate deal, creating new value together rather than just exchanging ideas and strategies, having mutual respect for one another’s skills, and not overly controlling the relationship.

Collaborative advantage is simply about mutual interest. Collaborative edge is about the collaborating parties also engaging in mutual support and in furthering a higher, common purpose that transcends them all.

**American Exceptionalism?**

Do Americans really have that much to learn from these examples from abroad? We think so. Ironically, some of the best examples of collaborative edge in recent years have been created in the U.S., but here they have tended to remain isolated experiments rather than to develop any systemic impact.

Take the case of federations described earlier. American reformers who are taking note of the positive outcomes associated with federating are often surprised to learn that the idea first was developed in Newport News, Virginia, in the late 1990s. In a quest to raise achievement in its schools in struggling circumstances, the school district there paired high-and low-performing schools together based on similarities in the demographics of the student bodies. It wasn’t just principals working with principals, but teachers also straddled their skill sets across schools. It took an inquisitive and enterprising visitor from the United Kingdom to see the potential in this model and to develop it as a key part of a national strategy.

As of this writing, all political leaders across the U.S. are fixated on the $4.35 billion to be dedicated by U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan to educational improvement through the Race to the Top (RTTT) funds. But if we pause to take a step back and look at what really is involved in the RTTT specifications, do we find any trace of the national and international evidence on the value of a collaborative edge rather than competitive advantage?

Look closely and you will see that there are no incentives in the RTTT for strong schools to help the weak. Especially in the provision on turnaround schools we simply get more of the same that was offered by the No Child Left Behind Act: Close struggling schools and disperse the displaced students; re-open struggling schools as charters; and fire the principals and make the staff re-apply for their jobs.

**Getting a Collaborative Edge**

We can do better. Even with federal policies pointing in the wrong direction, states and districts still control the lion’s share of their own funding. The public has grown skeptical of markets and teachers are tired of being bullied. There is a real opportunity for a different kind of leadership that is democratic and professional, animated by a social vision that is broad, generous, and integrative. How will you know when you have a collaborative edge? Here are five pointers.

- Make the first move to seek advice from or offer assistance to other schools within and outside your district.
- Press your district or state to develop initiatives in your community that necessitate all schools working together.
- Your collaborative efforts must not only concentrate on children who are just below proficiency; assist students far below that level and stimulate those above.
- Data-driven improvement involves more than looking at spreadsheets to find gaps and make quick interventions; it stimulates powerful conversations about changing the nature of teaching and learning.
- When you are out of the school for a meeting or professional development, don’t keep phoning or texting back. Distribute responsibility so the school can manage just fine without you.

We have ample evidence now that principals and their schools can and should work with other schools—that the strong can help the weak. This is not just an act of service and self-sacrifice. Rather, when leaders help each other, they strengthen capacity within themselves and among those they lead. They distribute leadership by developing others. They get better results for more students, and all the conversations are more fruitful.

High-performing countries outside the U.S. are already on the collaborative edge. The best businesses demonstrate that maintaining a collaborative edge beyond self-interested partnerships drives up their own performance, too. Collaborating outside our schools strengthens the quality of what we can achieve within them. We should not wait for districts or states to model the best collaborative principles of other countries and sectors. It’s time to seize the opportunities ourselves.

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**WEB RESOURCES**

The Promising Practices section of the NAESP Web site offers program and policy ideas submitted by principals who have found success in using them in their schools.

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